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GENERAL McCLELLAN , YOU'RE FIRED

November 7, 1862

Executive Mansion

Washington, D.C.

Dear General McClellan:

It is with heavy hand that I must inform you that you have been relieved as commander of the Army of the Potomac.

Although with the many proddings that I have sent your way, I had hoped that you would have seen the necessity for action and taken advantage of the opportunities President Davis and General Lee have presented you in the past. I do not take my action lightly, and regard it my duty to advise you as to why I have taken this recourse.

In my separate military readings and consultations with General Halleck on his work *Elements of Military Art and Science*, (1846)¹, a restatement of Antoine Henry Jomini's writings; it has been explained to me that while at West Point you were perhaps most influenced by this work. I too have read Jomini and feel that most of his writings are common sense in nature; but of no great depth of thought, only a restatement of what I believe the obvious, and a prescriptive text. Recently though, I received a missive from our ambassador to Prussia which contained a few key tenants from a preliminary English translation of a work entitle, *On War*, by a deceased, General Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz. I found the text descriptive, rather than prescriptive, and much to my

agreement, and of value in my consideration of your present position, and your performance during the Antietam Campaign.

One of General Clausewitz's thesis which particularly interested me, was his writings on "Military Genius". Clausewitz describes the character of Genius in war, as the ability to deal with *chance*, the unexpected, the unknown; and is composed of many traits: such as courage, physical endurance, presence of mind, energy, firmness, staunchness, emotional balance, strength of character, outstanding intellect, sense of locality (to visualize topography), *coup d'oeil* and determination. More specifically the last two listed traits of *coup d'oeil*, or inward eye, and determination, which Clausewitz describes as the, "....two qualities (that) are indispensable....",² are what I find most desirable for a commander of the Army of the Potomac. Clausewitz further explains that "Military Genius" is a combination of traits, which, "....consists in a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate but none may be in conflict with the rest."³ Herein, General McClellan lies your greatest weakness.

I have intrusted you with the command of the Army of the Potomac on two instances, and you have proved admirable at the task of organizing, training the army and improving morale. I can't fault your abilities as an organizer or administrator. I have found you intelligent, noting your graduation as second in the Class of 1846 from West Point; and not without courage as you exhibited during the Mexican War, when you were twice breveted for gallantry. What I find totally appalling, however, is your inability, serving as a senior theatre commander, to achieve victories on the battlefield when they are presented you. Let us examine the most recent Antietam campaign.

After the disastrous defeat of General Pope at the Battle of Second Bull Run, 29-30 August and Chantilly, 1 September, just past; I reinstated you as the commander of the Army of the Potomac. I did so against the protests of my cabinet due to what they perceive through your actions as, "....incompetence and disobedience that imperiled Pope's army."⁴ However, owing to your aforementioned skills I needed you to command again. I will admit that the army was in a sad state of affairs and much demoralized upon your taking command, especially portions which had comprised the Army of Virginia. But as General Halleck advised, the situation was critical. So with your first orders on 3 September, he advised, "There is every probability that the enemy, baffled in his intended capture of Washington, will cross the Potomac, and make a raid into Maryland or Pennsylvania,....a movable army must be immediately organized to meet him again in the field."⁵

From the 4th through the 6th of September the Army of Northern Virginia crossed the Potomac a mere 35 miles north of Washington, with General Lee entering Frederick, Maryland, on the 6th. General Halleck, with my concurrence, ordered the defenses of Washington, Baltimore, Hagerstown and Harrisburg strengthened. Your response to the invasion took longer than I wished, and not until the 12th of September did our army occupy Frederick. On the 13th when in the City of Frederick, your troops discovered a copy of General Lee's Special Orders No. 191 (the "lost dispatch"). This order was verified as authentic by Colonel Samuel E. Pittman of the Twelfth Corps, who had served with Colonel R. H. Chilton, Lee's Assistant Adjutant General, prior to the war. The order described in detail how the Army of Northern Virginia was divided into three elements. This was the third time in as many campaigns, since assuming command in June of this year, that General Lee had divided his army in the face of our armies, indicating the confidence he feels in the face of our commanders. Of course we later determined that Lee's army was actually in five independent sections, with elements separated by the

Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers; Walker's Division on Loudoun Heights, Virginia; McLaws and Anderson at Maryland Heights, Maryland; Jackson south of the Potomac approaching Harpers Ferry, Virginia from the west; Longstreet at Hagerstown, Maryland; and D. H. Hill, with Stuart at Boonsboro, Maryland.⁶ General McClellan, this information came to your attention by late morning of the 13th, your own cavalry's intelligence confirmed the enemies' positions, and yet you failed to move your army against General Lee until the morning of the 14th. This was an opportunity of unequalled proportions and you allowed it to slip away. You lacked the "inward eye" (*coup d'oeil*) to recognize the right point and time to attack. The determination to act with boldness and moral courage on the information at hand was not possessed by you.

You didn't move against the Rebels until the 14th of September and as a result they were ready for your advance and occupied strong defenses at the passes to South Mountain and the Cumberland Valley beyond. We lost many excellent men that day, I think needlessly. Also, we lost Harpers Ferry with 11,000 men, 73 guns (cannon), some ammunition, 13,000 small arms, and a considerable amount of stores,⁷ because you did not move soon enough to effect unobstructed passage of the South Mountain passes and relieve Colonel Miles at Harpers Ferry. You did not grasp the enemy's intentions, visualize the strategic and tactical situation of the campaign, nor possess the personal confidence and knowledge of your Army to move decisively.

On the 15th of September your first units arrived in the vicinity of Sharpsburg, Maryland, on Antietam Creek. Your cavalry followed close behind the Confederates as they established positions on the west side of Antietam Creek. You knew that the rebels could not have fully reassembled all their commands, and had not more than a few hours to prepare their fighting positions and if forced to retire from the field would have their backs to the Potomac River with only one crossing site. You again surrendered to your

unworthy trait of over caution and accepted inflated enemy strength estimates, and, therefore, did not engage the enemy. We can now see from all accounts, as reported in the official reports of the campaign, that Bobbie Lee was greatly inferior in numbers to our Army, and an excellent opportunity was missed.⁸ Again on the 16th you waited for more of our troops to arrive on the field before taking action (we have since learned that Lee had only 25,000 to 30,000 men on the field to your 60,000 on the field and another 15,000 within six miles of Sharpsburg); and then it was only to position two corps across Antietam Creek late in the day.

Your delay only served to indicate the army's intentions for the following day, and provided Lee time to position troops to counter your offensive movements for the 17th of September. On these occasions a "...quick recognition of the truth that the mind would ordinarily miss...",⁹ as to the enemy's disposition and strength, would have been clear to the commander possessing *coup d'oeil*. These opportunities were missed because you do not have the determination to act or an ability to see through the "fog" of war for the opportunities in battle. You do not possess what makes a great general in the field, an "inward eye." Your habit is to halt for long study and reflection before an engagement, but we can't afford these delays and missed opportunities that prolong the war and slowly destroys the life of the army you allege to hold a special affection.

The day of the great battle, the 17th of September, found General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia almost completely regrouped, and at worse his remaining dispersed commands would arrive on the field throughout the day, continually it seems, at the appropriate moment in the battle. To my sadness I have learned there were several near successes for the Army of the Potomac at Antietam on this day. The most probable success was our attack, about mid to late morning, on the Confederate center before Hill's Division. Hill writes in his official report, provided us by clandestine means, "There

were no troops near to hold the centre except a few hundred rallied from various brigades."¹⁰ He indicates that an exploitation of the union success in this area of the line would have resulted in control of the heights commanding the rebel rear and interior lines of communications to Sharpsburg and beyond. General McClellan you must sense the terrain, imagine the battle field and the terrain encompassing the entire campaign, to include the enemies lines of operations (retreat). You failed again to visualize this on the field at Antietam.

You have never realized, General, that a campaign is fought throughout, from beginning to end. You cannot lose heart. You cannot become overly cautious once bloodied. You must possess the instinct to make the important gut decisions on the battlefield and follow up the successes. As the Army of Northern Virginia withdrew from the field it was obvious to all that it was a vulnerable army, and that earnest pursuit might have created the opportunity for a decisive battle. After an extremely long and demanding campaign for General Lee, this was not the time to lessen our pressure. All our intelligence reports described the horrible condition of the southern troops as they marched through Maryland, and they were further incumbered by large numbers of casualties as they affected their retreat by pontoon bridges across the Potomac to Virginia. In spite of our 26,023 killed, wounded or missing for the campaign, I must point out that the rebel losses of 13,385 for the campaign was proportionally more devastating for them.¹¹ After the single most bloody-days battle of the war to date, and the sacrifice of our valiant soldiers; it is inexcusable that we did not follow up this repulse of the Confederacy from Union soil with a more decisive victory. Sir, where is your ability to see through the "fog" and take the "chances" offered in battle.

Throughout this entire campaign you have been a disappointment. I gave you my trust and command of the Army of the Potomac a second time to defeat General Lee in

the field. When engaged in battle you failed "...even in the darkest hour, (to) retain some glimmerings of inner light which leads to truth....", truth as to how the battle really looks. When examining "chance" and its relationship to the battlefield, we must remember that information (intelligence) will "trickle in", "... (intelligence) will continually impinge on our decisions, and our mind must be permanently armed....to deal with them,.... (because) we now know more,....this makes us more, not less uncertain."¹² Your caution continually costs our army dearly. You lack determination, boldness, and the ability to see and seize the opportunities of battle provided by "chance." Sir, I think you serve at a capacity above your abilities.

In contrast, Sir, General Lee out generated you continually during the campaign. He boldly moved north after the Second Bull Run campaign without reconstituting his army. He crossed the Potomac east of the Blue Ridge/Catoctin Mountains and concealed the true intention of his movements through an effective calvary screen. And not until the "lost dispatch" fell into your hands could we make sense of our continuing and confusing calvary reports. When Lee learned of the discovery of his "lost dispatch", almost a half day after you; he exhibited the "presence of mind" and "sense of locality" to deploy the meager troops at his immediate disposal in front of your advance. Because of *coup d'oeil* this commander moved decisively and with determination to delay your approach and collect his army at Sharpsburg. When he stood before you at Antietam with vastly inferior forces on the 15th and 16th of September, he used the terrain and time you gave him to his advantage, and you willingly gave him that time and position and did not attack. He chose a place to fight that allowed the road networks to facilitate interior lines, and established lines of operation to Harpers Ferry and the Shenandoah and Cumberland Valleys. He was able to assemble his army, fight you to a draw, and then withdraw from the field almost totally unmolested. Clearly Bobbie Lee understands and possesses the

desired traits of a successful General, and continually demonstrates a instinctiveness of *coup d'oeil*.

It was only through our good fortune that General Lee's "lost dispatch" came into your possession, and that you were subsequently able to repulse the Army of Northern Virginia from Maryland. Should this have not happened, God can only say what havoc the rebels would have wrought on Maryland and Pennsylvania.

General McClellan, as you are unaware of Clausewitz's writings, for you have not had the opportunity to study his preliminarily translated works; I can not fault you for not appreciating his concept of "Military Genius". But even had you known of his works, I doubt that it would have served you well. *Coup d'oeil* is a trait of birth as much as a learned condition. The ability to "see" the campaign and related engagements with a "perceived truth" and to have, "...the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead.",¹³ could never be in you. Clausewitz summarizes his thesis on "Military Genius" stating, "...it is the inquiring rather than the creative mind, the comprehensive rather than the specialized approach, the calm rather than the excitable head to which in war we would choose to entrust the fate of our brothers and children, and the safety and honor of our country."¹⁴ General Lee exhibits the majority of the traits associated with "Military Genius", but most specifically *coup d'oeil*. He was extraordinarily successful in his recovery from the disastrous "lost dispatch." And, although his campaign into Maryland was not a triumph, our failure to capitalize on several of the "chances" of war were particularly disastrous. Should I have the option, I would appoint Bobbie Lee as the commander of all the Union armies.

Sir, your services are no longer desired. **General McClellan you are fired!**

Cordially,

Abraham Lincoln

President of the United States

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